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Uribe's Second Mandate, the War, and the Implications for Civil-Military Relations in Colombia; Strategic Insights, v. 5, issue 2 (February 2006)



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Uribe's Second Mandate, the War, and the Implications for Civil-Military Relations in Colombia

Strategic Insights, Volume V, Issue 2 (February 2006)

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Strategic Insights is a monthly electronic journal produced by the [Center for Contemporary Conflict](#) at the [Naval Postgraduate School](#) in Monterey, California. The views expressed here are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the views of NPS, the Department of Defense, or the U.S. Government.

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Introduction

The recent decision of the Colombian Constitutional Court that cleared the way for President Álvaro Uribe Vélez to run for an unprecedented second term appeared to have realized the most profound desires of Colombians of a more conservative persuasion. Indeed, early indications are that Uribe, with an approval rating hovering well over fifty percent, will cruise effortlessly to an unprecedented, and hitherto unconstitutional, second mandate. However, hardly was the ink dry on the Constitutional Court's decision than hero of the hard line, take-no-prisoners strategy in the war against Colombia's insurgents appeared to reverse course and agree to negotiate with Colombia's two main insurgent groups.

As recently as last summer, Colombian military officers were convinced that, under Uribe, their country had reached a historic turning point in its long and tumultuous conflict. Civil-military relations have stabilized under the leadership of a strong president who protects the military's core competencies from civilian encroachment. The restructuring and professionalization of Colombia's military, in the works since the 1990s, has transformed the once lethargic Colombian armed forces into an offensive-minded organization that appears to have the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC), Colombia's primary insurgent group, on the run. At the same time, Uribe has successfully negotiated the disarmament of several "fronts" of the right-wing *Autodefensas Unidas de Colombia* (AUC). The military stands high in public esteem. "Democratic Security," Uribe's aggressive strategy for reclaiming the countryside from the insurgents and paramilitaries, has increased investor confidence.

In what appeared to be a surprising *volte face*, however, on December 13, 2005, the Casa Nariño, the Presidential Palace in Bogotá, revealed that 180 kilometers of Colombian hinterland would be "demilitarized" to provide a secure venue to negotiate a "humanitarian agreement" with the FARC. For cognoscenti of Colombia's conflict, Uribe's concession recalled a similar exercise carried out by his predecessor Andrés Pastrana, now Colombia's ambassador to Washington, who handed over a "*despeje*" or "cleared zone" to the FARC in the south of the country as a precondition for months of fruitless negotiations with the insurgents. Furthermore, conversations with the enemies of the Colombian state appeared to have become the new *modus operandi* for this president—

Uribe has already initiated negotiations with the *Ejército de Liberación Nacional* (ELN), a smaller insurgent group, which are on-going in Havana.

This opening to the insurgency is certainly a tactical adjustment, rather than a major re-assessment of policy and strategy, however. First, there is a major difference between the huge, Switzerland-size swath of *despeje* the FARC utilized to grow coca and secrete kidnap victims until it was reoccupied in 2002 by the Colombian military, and a smaller, demilitarized area under the supervision of the three European countries—France, Spain and Switzerland—that will supervise the negotiations.

Second, it is unlikely that Uribe, unlike Pastrana, expects anything to come of talks aimed to broker an exchange of a cohort of FARC hostages that include politicians, soldiers, students and foreigners, for five hundred guerrillas in government hands. The FARC is unlikely to hand Uribe a political success of that magnitude on the eve of the election. More likely, Uribe's decision to negotiate is a pre-electoral maneuver to soften his hard-line image with moderate Colombians. As a general rule, presidents tend to move toward the center in their quest for a second mandate. In Colombia, this makes special sense as the majority Liberal Party is engaged in one of its periodic migrations leftward, which will no doubt leave some moderate voters looking for other options. The President has also surprised some of his closest advisors by hanging tough with Washington on the Free Trade Agreement, and recommending, against the advice of the business community with which he has close links, a significant raise in the minimum wage.^[1]

It must also be recognized that on the war front, Uribe has also become a victim of his own success. The military offensives launched from 2002 under the banner of Uribe's "Democratic Security" strategy, broke the FARC's stranglehold on Bogotá, reopened many of the nation's main thoroughfares, disrupted the clandestine "corridors" used by the FARC to transport arms, drugs and soldiers, and has driven the insurgents into the more remote areas of the country. Now that the enemy no longer lurks at the gate, Colombians have shifted their attentions from the war to the economy. Therefore, Colombia's "war president" must redefine and reposition himself with the voters. Of no group is this more true than the families of Colombia's kidnapped victims, estimated at over four thousand people, and their supporters who have waged a high profile campaign against Uribe's hitherto iron refusal to negotiate with the FARC lest it accord them combatant status in international law.^[2]

All of this makes perfect sense. But where does it leave Colombian civil-military relations? Colombian soldiers have been here before, in the 1960s and late 1970s when they sensed that a military victory apparently within their grasp was squandered by politicians who fundamentally distrust and historically under-resource the military. Colombian presidents Belisario Betencur (1982-1986) and Andrés Pastrana (1998-2002) both negotiated with the insurgents, who simply used the discussions to buy time, and gain publicity and a degree of legitimacy from a peace process that they were never serious about seeing through to fruition. The consensus among soldiers has been that continued success in the war hinges on the continuity of Uribe's administration. Otherwise, Colombia's endemic structural problems are likely to resurface, among them economic over-dependence on U.S. and Venezuelan markets, poor infrastructure, an overvalued peso, and dropping oil revenues, not to mention the conflagration in the countryside. A return to political instability could be a real disincentive to investment and trigger an economic downturn, as well as result in the surrender many of the hard won gains made by the military against the insurgents since Uribe took office in 2002.^[3]

Uribe's first three years in office have witnessed a marked improvement in civil-military relations, at least as far as the presidency is concerned. The new Colombian president understood that the military sought a commander-in-chief willing to lead the nation in wartime. "The military always felt that it was fighting the war alone, that no one was paying attention," Sergio Jaramillo, ex-aide to former Defense Minister Marta Lucia Ramirez, believes. "Uribe made the military feel that they are appreciated, that the government is behind them. Uribe has the authority to make things

happen.”[4] One of the things he made happen within a week of taking office was to declare a state of emergency that imposed press censorship, removed elected officials who “contribute to public turmoil,” and bestowed sweeping powers on the security forces in tumultuous areas of the country.[5]

The militarization of strategy, the desire to take the war to the FARC, all appeal to a military that sees negotiations with the enemy as closely akin to treason, and who historically has done everything in their power to sabotage them. “Uribe had the advantage that the military like him, and are more subordinated to the president,” notes Andrés Dávila Ladrón de Guevara, Director of the Division of Justice and Security in the National Department of Planning.[6]

But while those who equate Uribe’s survival with that of Colombia are obsessed with the road he takes to work each day, Uribe’s leadership style is a very personal one that has come at the price of institution building—the National Security Council seldom meets, while senior generals by-pass their civilian “superiors” in a largely toothless Ministry of Defense to deal directly with the president. Congressional oversight of the military is largely a fiction of the 1991 constitution. “The style of this president is to call subordinate commanders directly,” is how retired U.S. Air Force General and Latin American specialist Richard Goetze puts it. “This undermines the minister of defense. It undermines the military chain of command as well. This damages the concept of civil-military relations. This is a strategic vulnerability. The president is not allowing institutions to be built. And this is not just in defense. The minister of foreign relations is ?lvaro Uribe. He deals directly with the United States. There is no coordination. It’s a one-man show.”[7] Others claim that Uribe’s tenure has accelerated a trend of the fragmentation and marginalization of the political parties, vital building blocks of democracy, as well as of environmental laws and some of the fundamental social and civic rights built into the 1991 Constitution.[8]

Uribe’s decision to engage the State’s enemies at the conference table is not without dangers. A faltering of resolve in the war against the insurgency, combined with the endemic weakness of Colombian political parties,[9] would strengthen the *autodefensas*—paramilitary groups that have proliferated in Colombia since the 1990s in reaction to the government’s inadequate response to the insurgency—and institutionalize what is already a “deep transformation of the networks of territorial power,” according to *El Tiempo* commentator Pedro Medellín.[10] Uribe has staked his political career on disbanding these AUC units and, so far, he can claim considerable success—an estimated 13,000 of the AUC’s 20,000 fighters have demobilized, with the remainder scheduled to turn in their weapons by February 2006.[11] “The success of the peace agreement with the AUC depends on him,” Ex-Vice Minister of Justice Rafael Nieto argues. “Otherwise, they could take up arms.”[12] The strategy that aimed to disarm and demobilize the AUC offered a logic. “This government is considered a friend of the AUC,” Colombian Air Force Lieutenant-Colonel Juan Carlos Gómez notes. “Uribe needs to move beyond this and get at the guerrillas. This (demobilization) is a very fragile process. But the hardcore will not give up and will continue to fight. The AUC is like snow. They have lots of support in areas where the state has no authority.”[13]

Indeed, it is unlikely that the AUC will fade quietly away for several reasons. First, many of its members are not keen to be punished for their crimes, even under the very magnanimous wrist-slapping provisions of the Law of Justice and Peace passed in 2005 to facilitate the peace process with the AUC.[14] The AUC has witnessed the enlistment of drug lords in its ranks eager to wrap themselves in the mantle of AUC “patriotism” to avoid extradition to the United States. Indeed, because Washington may require that Colombia extradite drug criminals in order to claim \$600 million in aid, the current campaign for the Colombian Congress is awash in AUC cash, much of it earned in the drug trade, to insure that AUC influence remains strong in the highest levels of government.

Second, demobilization, the great success of Uribe’s first term, hangs by a thread. Paramilitary stand-down parades are seldom supported by meaningful government programs to reintegrate

demobilized *autodefensas* into gainful employment. Therefore, many may simply drift into lives of crime, or remained armed and on the *qui vive* against a FARC resurgence.[15] The bald truth is that Colombia is a warfare state, so that combat and violence are the only *métier* that generations of young Colombian men and women know. Indeed, indications are that the paramilitaries are actually augmenting their power by taking advantage of Uribe's "Democratic Security" strategy to move in behind the army as it clears out once FARC-controlled areas, to extend their illegal activities including cocaine trafficking, kidnapping and murder, and even infiltrating important institutions like Congress and the DAS, the government's primary intelligence agency.[16] If Uribe is perceived as being soft on the FARC, the AUC may abandon the pretence of demobilization altogether.[17]

The good news for Uribe is that insurgency appears to be in a deep stall. The ELN leadership believed that they could create revolutionary conditions, especially if they siphoned off oil revenues in Arauca, Colombia's oil-rich eastern state that borders on Venezuela, to build communities. "But the ELN can't survive for more than five years," Vice Minister of Defense J.M. Eastman believes. "They don't have the military power even to negotiate. They are hemorrhaging soldiers into the paramilitaries." [18] Even should the ELN conclude a truce in Havana, the effects would be more psychological than practical—it counts few soldiers, and many of its local units are already controlled by the FARC. The FARC, too, is undoubtedly weakened, but opinion is divided on how much.[19] Steven Dudley, who visited a FARC rally in the *Despeje* in 2000, came away with the impression that he had witnessed a hollow pantomime, during which an ageing leadership mouthed empty "Bolivarian" slogans before a half-passive, have-fearful *campesino* audience coerced into attendance.[20]

The movement has trouble constructing an urban agenda. While it understands that it must conquer the cities to win, and has attempted to create urban cells and even reach out to university students by offering scholarships, Colombian city dwellers regard the FARC as a collection of violent bumpkins whose rural political agenda holds little appeal.[21] "They are very rural people, very *campesinos*, their agenda is very local," Eastman, who has experience in negotiating with guerrillas, noted. They are losing operational capacity in Cundinamarca and on the Atlantic coast. *Plan Patriota*, as the recent U.S.-Colombian counter-terrorism campaign is called, has disrupted their communications, most notably the web of "strategic corridors" that run through the country for the transport of troops, arms, and drugs, and threatened their base in the southeast of the country. "The FARC is beginning to retreat, and to fight at a distance using snipers and explosives," Nieto contends. The government has enjoyed some success targeting mid-level FARC leaders, a critical link in a movement that recruits among children and ill-educated *campesinos*, and whose op-tempo of late has left little time for political indoctrination and what might be called "professional development." [22] Desertions are around eight thousand, and growing daily.

Nevertheless, Colombian journalist Alfredo Rangel believes that it is too early to declare victory. "The FARC is weakened but far from defeated. It is possible to lose what we have won. FARC's retreat may be only temporary." This summer, Rangel saw FARC in tactical retreat, not on the cusp of collapse. "The FARC still has its capabilities intact and conserves its capacity, in the South especially," he cautions.[23] The International Crisis Group also warns that *Plan Patriota* has shot its bolt. By concentrating on the South, the government has allowed the FARC to expand elsewhere. The FARC's infrastructure has sustained the worst that the government can throw at it and survives. The offensives against the FARC in the South have passed what Clausewitz calls "the culminating point of victory," and are now actually winding down without decisive results. And while demonstrating "incremental success" in war is important to convince Colombia's people and allies of eventual victory, "excessive triumphalism" over military victories has lulled the public into a false sense of success. In fact, according to this view, to sustain offensives against the FARC, the government would actually have to double the defense budget and expand the military and police by a third, "and even then there would be no guarantees." [24] Indeed, the fear is that Uribe's simultaneous offensives against the AUC, drugs, and the

insurgents may actually bring about a temporary alliance among elements of those groups for the duration of the election.[25]

Unfortunately for Uribe, the trends are actually going in the opposite direction. While government forces continued to hold the initiative in the south of the country, in the past months, the FARC has initiated vicious local offensives, massing 5 to 1 advantages against overmanned military and police in other areas, inflicting 14 percent casualties while taking only 5 percent. In the latest example of this tactic, on December 17, 2005, an estimated five hundred guerrillas from FARC front 47 and their ELN allies, under the command of a feared, one-eyed female commander who travels under the *nom de guerre* of "Karina," struck at a major police post at San Marino, in southern Choco, using gas mortars. Eight police were killed and another thirty-three were captured, more pawns to be played in upcoming "humanitarian" negotiations.[26] The government's offensive in oil-rich Arauca, personally selected by Uribe as a test bed for the success of "Democratic Security," was seriously set back by a FARC initiated "armed strike."

Elsewhere, the FARC has followed the classic guerrilla strategy of breaking into small groups, and fighting "at a distance" with mines and booby traps.[27] While desertions from the FARC continued to be impressive, most are only low level, imperfectly indoctrinated soldiers, many of them children. There are plenty more where these came from. The Center for Integrated Action, a government initiative to coordinate social and economic support services to consolidate reclaimed FARC areas, has been starved of resources. As a result, Colombian forces have been left on their own, or required to tolerate—or encourage—the "assistance" of paramilitaries to win the "hearts and minds" of the population.[28]

Narcotrafficking persists, and provides both the AUC and the insurgency with resources that allow them to resist the government. Demobilization of the paramilitaries actually benefits the FARC, because guerrillas have moved to fill the power vacuums in localities where the state remains weak or absent. Foreign policy also seems to be a problem. Alleged assassination plots against the president of Venezuela concocted by Colombian officers and anti-Chavez Venezuelan exiles have hardly made Hugo Chavez well disposed toward sealing his border. Ecuador was noticeably unhelpful in the summer of 2005 when FARC guerrillas crossed the Ecuadorian border willing to bushwhack Colombian security forces. Indeed, both Ecuadorian and Venezuelan military equipment has turned up in the hands of the FARC.[29] Uribe is also beginning to understand the disadvantages of hitching his star to U.S. support and adopting a confrontational attitude toward his neighbors in a region increasingly disenchanted with Washington's policies.[30] U.S. support will undoubtedly diminish as aid dollars are sucked up by Iraq and Afghanistan, and now Hurricane Katrina. "The United States has a responsibility because it is financing narcotrafficking," Nieto maintains. "U.S. aid is necessary. We can solve many of our own problems if cocaine goes away. I pray for the day when methamphetamines replace cocaine as the drug of choice in the U.S. Other Latin American countries have problems. We have drugs."

And while this view may be comforting to Colombians, it is unlikely to find an echo in the U.S. Congress, already miffed by reports of continuing human rights abuses and collusion between army and paramilitary groups, Uribe's foot-dragging on extraditing drug kingpins, and the perception that Colombia is not doing all it could to stop drug trafficking. Indeed, indications are that 2006 will see a significant cut in U.S. aid to Colombia.[31]

Rangel for one refuses to equate Uribe's survival with that of Colombia. The belief that the FARC is on the ropes is, he insists, wishful thinking. Negotiations with the insurgents will happen later rather than sooner. "Uribe is not salvation, he is not irreplaceable. After Uribe, it won't be the deluge. The good policies will continue. People say that good things began with Uribe. But things began before him, like Plan Colombia [which was negotiated under Uribe's predecessor, Andrés Pastrana]. The disappearance of Plan Colombia would be very grave. Uribe without Plan Colombia cannot do great things." "Colombia has to persist in our strategy," Eastman believes. "Public opinion has to get involved. The timetable is a problem. There is a political process that

the elections may change. These last four years have set the priorities of the nation. This will limit the options of Uribe's successor." Indeed, *La Semana* columnist Marta Ruiz believes that Uribe and the Colombian armed forces have extracted all of the benefit that they are likely to squeeze out of "Democratic Security." The question remains: do they have the capacity for self-criticism and course correction in the face of an altered strategic landscape?[32]

Even though Uribe will likely remain in office for a second four-year term, Colombian civil-military relations will undoubtedly face serious challenges. Nieto speculates that, without Uribe, institutional development would atrophy. "This will make it difficult for Colombian institutions to react," he warns, especially if the insurgency worsens. However, although Colombia remains a durable democracy, institutions other than the presidency and the military have evinced little evidence of vitality under Uribe – *au contraire*. And even the hint of "institutional strengthening" in the presidency is totally personality drive. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that Uribe's popularity has more to do with the fact that he caught the wave of Pastrana's preparation, Clintonesque generosity, and Bush willingness to rewrite the ROE's (rule of engagement) for Colombia than with any innate charisma. To be fair to Uribe, he has been able to prevent the military and intelligence services from pursuing their own agenda in military reform, with Venezuela or with the AUC. In May 2005, for instance, Uribe fired four army generals who protested that his U.S.-inspired reorganization of the military to impose "jointness" disadvantaged Colombia's senior service. He moved to contain recent revelations of paramilitary infiltration of the DAS, and to stop intrigues between Colombian officers and intelligence personnel and Venezuelan exiles, on-going since 2003, to plot the overthrow of Hugo Chavez.[33]

But these points of glitter do not fundamentally alter the trend lines of poor state capacity. The crunch may come when diminished U.S. aid combines with an economic downturn to restrict defense dollars. This could curtail Colombian military transformation and allow the insurgents to recoup some of the ground that they have lost over the past years. A loss of battlefield momentum combined with economic setbacks might encourage a new president to negotiate with insurgents, in the manner of Samper or Pastrana. This would certainly raise the hackles of the military, encourage a renaissance of the *autodefensas*, and possibly lead to an upsurge in human rights abuses with military, police, or intelligence complicity. Colombia lives with the legacies of its past, "because of the guerrillas' penchant to destroy things and the paramilitaries' tendency to thwart any change at all." [34] And, one might add, with the Colombian military's historic reluctance to place their muscle at the service of a political strategy that incorporates negotiation and compromise.

Despite the fact that Colombia has been in a state of incipient civil war practically since the country's founding in 1830, Colombian society's sense of connection with the military is tenuous, for several reasons. First of all, the country's elites traditionally have boycotted the military and shown little interest in military affairs. "Colombia doesn't have a strong military tradition like other Latin American countries," notes Alfredo Rangel. "The military attracts lower to lower middle class. Those who join the officer corps are looking for social promotion." So far, at least, Colombia seems to fit the "globalized" pattern, rather than offer the exception. Second, the current "*conflicto*" typically has been interpreted as a political and social rather than a security problem. "From the 1970s to the mid-1990s, people said that we had a conflict because Colombia was a closed democracy with elites that oppressed the rural population," Eastman contends. "If that's the view, then the conflict is not seen as a security problem, but as a problem of democracy and political process, even one of economic development. So, there was no link with defense policies." The theoretical basis for Colombia's strategic approach to the war was constructed in the 1960s and 1970s when a group of "violencologists" at National University, the most important public university in Colombia, theorized that Colombia's violence stemmed from social and economic inequality, and the failure of government institutions to order and arbitrate national life. This view influenced political, economic and social approaches to the conflict which climaxed with Pastrana's offer of a *zona despeje* as the basis of negotiation with the FARC.[35]

Third, polite society, urban society, has recoiled from *la Guerra sucia*. Without strong political leadership, a realistic prospect of “victory,” and some control on the “dirtiest” aspects of the dirty war, the Colombian people, especially city dwellers who now comprise approximately 75 percent of the population, will continue to remain aloof from a conflict which, because of the success of “Democratic Security,” has once again been exiled to the remote “frontier” areas. This must be part of Uribe’s calculations when he opted for an “appeasement lite” version of his predecessors’ once-reviled strategy of negotiations. The downside is that Uribe’s success has allowed Colombian society to relapse into its “why bother?” default mode. So long as the military can keep Colombia’s insurgencies at arm’s length, and governments can play on U.S. fears of communists, terrorists or drugs to extract resources from Washington, the incentive for Colombians to carry out the necessary reforms to put their own house in order is removed.

Finally, narcotrafficking has transformed the nature of the conflict from the 1980s. Neo-liberals in the Centro de Estudios Regionales (CERE) in the Universidad de los Andes theorized in the 1990s that poverty could not be the origins of Colombia’s problems, by demonstrating that insurgency prospered in areas where there were resources, not in the poorest areas. The problem, they said, was the weakness of the state which allowed criminal violence to spread. Violence caused the social situation, not vice versa. Therefore, Colombia has a security problem, not an economic or social problem. This has informed Uribe’s approach to the conflict. If you end the violence, you will fix the social problem because it will allow economic development. Not everyone agrees with this view. Nor is it clear how Uribe’s failure to build state capacity will alleviate the conditions that allow sub-state actors to prosper. Indeed, there is confusion about whether Colombia has a war at all, and, if so, what are its causes—ideology, poverty, or drugs? Most Colombians simply want to turn the “*conflicto*” over to the armed forces and wash their hands of it.

But it is certain that in the last fifteen years, drugs have altered the dynamic of Colombian politics. “The old Liberal/Conservative conflict has been changed by drugs,” according to Wiesner. He might have added that it has also been changed by electoral reform, which has weakened, but hardly broken; the Liberal/Conservative stranglehold on Colombian politics. “This has broken down traditional party loyalty, as peasants have been driven off the land by drug barons. So, the country is largely apolitical. The state institutions don’t work. Impunity and corruption are rife. The legal system doesn’t work, so people take the law into their own hands and have no fear of being caught.”^[36] “There isn’t a civil society here and an armed guerrilla society on the other side,” Colombian Communist chief Jaime Caycedo told Steven Dudley. “They are two integral parts of the same society.”^[37] “It’s difficult to say why we have guerrillas,” Eastman reflects. “Other countries have poverty but no guerrillas. I think that Colombia has a national identity. It’s not that no one cares.” Others think that the sense of national identity is weak. “It’s hard to imagine the poverty in the countryside,” Juan Carlos Gómez remarked. “Outside of Bogotá, it’s really another country.”

No where is the social inequality of Colombia more apparent than in the military’s conscription policies. While the military has taken steps to professionalize its ranks, attempts to institute a more equitable method of conscription that would share the burden across social classes has failed to gain traction. The burden of fighting the “*conflicto*” falls heavily on the peasantry, no matter which side enlists them. Colombians might admire the military from a distance, but that does not translate into a desire to enlist their children. Attempts by the MOD to introduce a lottery system in 2004 failed to get a final reading in Congress. The Constitutional Court has declared that only professional soldiers can be ordered into combat. The war, often intense, is localized in remote areas of the country. “I get calls all of the time asking how to get a son out of military service,” Gómez confessed. “For Colombians, the problem of the FARC is the problem of the government. This is reflected in conscription. We have a class system in this country. Everyone has an interest in the status quo—so long as I get along. I talk to my classmates. It’s a horrible thing to say, but they ask: ‘What will happen if we finish this war? We will lose our jobs.’ There are people who think like that. The same goes for the NGOs. Everyone has an interest in the status

quo.” “We don’t have a tradition of military service in Colombia,” Eastman believes, at least not one for the middle classes. “Nor is it sexy to fight a civil war. People would feel more engaged if it were an international war. We have a terrorist threat. This is not a civil conflict between race, religion, ideology. The guerrillas don’t represent a population.”

One irony of this pervasive feeling of detachment so far as the war is concerned is that the military remains Colombia’s most popular institution, according to opinion polls. But this does not necessarily translate into firm support for the war.^[38] The largest cities where the majority of the population lives struggle to maintain a sense of normalcy. Demanding minimal sacrifices from the Colombian population is probably a requirement of Uribe’s—and by extension the military’s—popularity. Because the military is taking care of the problem, the population can express its gratitude without actually having to make sacrifices. The military might be far less popular if more people, especially the middle classes, had to serve in it.

This fundamental divide between civilians and soldiers about how this “*conflicto*” is to be resolved lies at the heart of Colombian civil-military relations, according to Alfredo Rangel. “Civilian and military priorities are different. The civilians want peace through dialogue. The soldiers want military victory. The military is very jealous about keeping their space, and keeping the civilians out.” War, apparently, is their space. Therefore, all of the combatants in Colombia—insurgents, *autodefensas*, and the military—offer mirror images of each other, none with a political strategy, all committed to a dogma of armed struggle until an elusive victory is achieved. Then what? The peace process under Pastrana, while welcomed among the general population, was extremely unpopular with the military. “The military was very opposed to the peace process,” Eastman, who was negotiating with the ELN, remembered. “The worse thing that you can do is to dishonor the military. Some soldiers saw the peace process as dishonoring the military. It didn’t hurt me, because I had a personal relationship with the soldiers. Besides, the ELN is really off the radar screen, so I was never the object of recriminations. But the FARC is something else.”

Lt. Col. Juan Carlos Gómez lays out the worst case scenario: “Uribe is trying to change the culture. The government is making a huge effort. But it cannot maintain it beyond three years. Plan Colombia will end next year. What will Colombia do? If the FARC can demonstrate that Democratic Security is not working, a sort of Têt Offensive that will discredit Uribe’s policy, this may encourage a desire for peace at any price. We will see a return to Pastrana’s policy of negotiations, which was very popular. The feeling will be that the FARC is too strong and that we cannot win. If the Colombian population have the feeling that they are insecure, if the FARC begins to plant bombs in Bogotá, then there will be popular pressure for negotiations. No one cares if you bomb a peasant house. But if there are bombs in Bogotá, everyone cares. The Colombian people are not very cultured. Ask the population which day is Independence Day, half won’t know.”

Fears are that Uribe’s failure could usher in a left-wing government intent on making peace based on “partition,” a formalized version of the *zona despeje*, just to get peace. “This is a historic moment,” Gómez believes. The FARC is in retreat. But “we are running against time. Uribe needs another term to defeat the FARC. The fear is that, if Uribe runs for another term, then the FARC will try to kill him.” Andrés Peñate, ex-Vice Minister of Defense, now director of the DAS, Colombia’s CIA, disingenuously argues that a “softer” approach to prosecuting the war would not necessarily lead to a military *coup*: “There is no threat of (military) intervention since Rojas Pinilla. The military can go on strike—‘Operation Turtle’ we call it, when the military drags their feet. Betancur ignored the advice of the military. We had the same problem with Pastrana. Negotiations destroyed morale. But they obeyed. They are Prussians.”^[39]

David Bushnell, one of the great historians of Colombia, remarked that, unlike other Latin American countries—Mexico or Venezuela for example—violence in Colombia is both widespread and endemic, but it seldom has proven an effective avenue to political power.^[40] The political structure simply accommodates violence, absorbs it, while the population makes the

necessary psychological adjustments, as if it were a normal condition, like rain, as American journalist Tina Rosenberg noted when she visited Medellín during the worst phase of drug-related violence in the late 1980s.^[41] “It’s sad to say, but Colombia hasn’t suffered enough,” Wiesner suggests. “The conflict, through horrible, has been very localized. So, no options have been taken off the table, as with Reconstruction after the American Civil War, or Nazism and Shintoism in Germany and Japan in 1945.”

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References

1. Like a true conservative, however, Uribe continues to weaken government oversight of banks and financial markets, environmental law, and the mining code. Large businesses pay fewer taxes, and the right to petition for immediate court action has been curtailed. Maria Teresa Ronderos, “Nine Predictions for 2006,” *La Semana*, in FIBIS LAP20060108005006 (January 9, 2006).
2. “Colombian President Uribe Seeking to Win Over Politically Moderate Voters,” in FIBIS LAP20051219004007 (December 19, 2005).
3. Interview with Rafael Nieto, Former Vice-Minister of Justice and Human Rights Consultant, Bogotá, June 24, 2005.
4. Sergio Jaramillo. All quotes come from an interview with the author on June 28, 2005, Bogotá.
5. “[Forward Operation Locations in Latin America: Transcending Drug Control](#),” *Transnational TNIB Briefing Series*, No. 2003/6, 8-9.
6. Andrés Dávila Ladrón de Guevara. All quotes come from an interview with the author on June 30, 2005, Bogotá.
7. General Richard Goetze. All quotes come from an interview with the author on July 21, 2005, in Monterey, CA.
8. Maria Teresa Ronderos, “Nine Predictions for 2006,” *La Semana*, January 9, 2006, in FIBIS LAP2006108005006; See also, Juan David Laverde Palma, “Political Parties in Intensive Care,” *El Espectador*, November 20, 2005, in FBIS LAP20051120004003.
9. Uribe refused to join any of the seven parties that have endorsed him because, according to the editor of the Bogotá weekly *La Semana*, Maria Teresa Ronderos, he wants a free hand to govern without the constraint of a party platform. “With that decision, Uribe is single-handedly undoing what he did with the political reform to strengthen the parties, which are key institutions in a stable democracy.” A quoted in “Nine Predictions for 2006,” *La Semana*, in FIBIS, LAP20060108005006 (January 9, 2006). A recent study commissioned by the U.S. National Democratic Institute (NDI) on Colombian political parties concluded that the once powerful Liberal and Conservative parties that once ruled Colombia as a condominium had been fragmented by electoral reform into a myriad of 50 parties, only eight of which have more than two seats in

Congress, and who do not choose their leaders according to any democratic standards of transparency. "There is no clear difference between them...They do not have any capacity for governance ...[nor] the ability to draw up or carry out public policies." From "Colombia: NDI Analysis Finds Parties Lack Credibility, Stability" in FBIS LAP20051120004003 (November 22, 2005).

10. *FBIS Report in Spanish* (September 27, 2005).

11. "Colombia: Militiamen Resume Laying Down Arms, Violence Persists" in FBIS, LAP20051213058004 (December 12, 2005).

12. Rafael Nieto, International Consultant and former Vice Minister of Justice. All information comes from an interview with the author on June 24, 2005, Bogotá.

13. Lt. Col. Juan-Carlos Gómez Ramírez, Director Derechos Humanos y Derecho Internacional Humanitario/Director of Human Rights and International Humanitarian Law], Ministry of Defense. All quotes come from an interview with the author on June 25, 2005 Bogotá.

14. There is virtually no protection for witnesses or court officers willing to testify against drug traffickers, while the penalties are so light as to be almost derisory. Ronderos, *Op. Cit.*, "Nine Predictions for 2006."

15. Ronderos, *Ibid.*

16. Leo Valencia, "Learning to Negotiate," in FBIS LAP20051220347003 (December 20, 2005).

17. Marta Ruiz, "Con 38 de fiebre," *La Semana*, December 12, 2005.

18. J.M. Eastman, Vice-Minister in charge of Budgets, Strategic Planning, U.S.-Colombian relations (Plan Colombia). All quotes come from an interview with the author on June 28, 2005, Bogotá.

19. "[Las FARC – Repliegue por 'estrategia' o por necesidad](#)," Centro de Analisis Socilpolitico, June 3, 2005; and "[Situación de los terroristas](#)," August 23, 2005.

20. "The rebels' show of arms was more convincing than their speeches. They didn't mingle among the people, and it was clear they had coerced most of them into going to the rally." Steven Dudley, [Walking Ghosts: Murder and Guerrilla Politics in Colombia](#) (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), 179.

21. I thank my former student Captain Paul Saskewitz, USAF, for this observation.

22. These mid-tier leaders are regarded as the FARC's critical link, because of their administrative responsibilities, their role in arms smuggling and other criminal activities, and the power they hold over the largely peasant rank-and-file. "Colombian Army Increasingly Effective Against Middle-Tier FARC Leaders" in FBIS LAP20051115347002 (November 22, 2005).

23. Interview with Alfredo Rangel, Director of Security and Democracy. All quotes from an interview with the author on June 28, 2005, Bogotá.

24. "Colombia: Presidential Politics and Peace Prospects," 12.

25. Ronderos, *Op. Cit.*

26. "FARC Kidnap over 33, Kill Seven Policemen in Colombia's Choco Department," *El Tiempo*, December 18, 2005, in FBIS LAP20051218004002. Later stories reported eight policemen killed. "Karina," whose real name is Nelly Avila, joined the FARC in 1993 and has ascended the ranks to become its Western Regional Commander. In 2002, President Uribe personally identified Karina as a prime target for capture, and placed a \$650,000 bounty on her head. "Colombia: Female FARC Leader Suspected of Rebel Attack on Police Outpost," in FBIS, LAP20051220062001 (December 20, 2005).

27. "Objetivo: mutilar," *La Semana*, November 30, 2005.

28. Marta Ruiz, "Con 38 de fiebre," *Op. Cit.* Also "Colombian Army Brigade Under Criticism for Record on Human Rights," in FBIS, LAP20051211004003 (December 12, 2005).

29. "La historia se repite. Nuevas capturas e indicios indican que armas del Ejército ecuatoriano están yendo a parar a manos de las FARC," *La Semana*, November 30, 2005.

30. "Close Ties to US, Distance from Neighbors, Seen as Disadvantageous for Colombia," in FBIS LAP20051219004003 (December 9, 2005).

31. Alfonso Cullar Araujo, "A Rude Awakening," *La Semana*, in FBIS LAP20051219004003 (December 19, 2005).

32. Marta Ruiz, "Con 38 de fiebre," *Op. Cit.*

33. "Uribe Scolds DAS Director for Refuting Plot against Chavez," in FBIS FEA2005122105539 (December 21, 2005).

34. Dudley, [*Op Cit.*](#), 200.

35. Professor Roman Ortiz, interview, June 29, 2005, Bogotá.

36. Mauricio Wiesner Acero, International Consultant. All quotes are from an interview with the author on June 23, 2005, Bogotá

37. Dudley, [*Op. Cit.*](#), 228.

38. "In terms of public order, Colombians have mixed opinions on the subject. They support forceful actions against the guerrillas and paramilitaries, including the extradition of the top leaders. But they also agree with the process in Ralito [Where demobilization negotiations are carried out between the government and the AUC] and they would be willing to extend this policy to the guerrillas: 73 percent would support talks with the FARC [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] and 59 percent approve of a humanitarian exchange. Will the opposition be able to establish any alternative position?" *La Semana*, September 26, 2005. *El Colombiano* commentator Alejo Vargas "draws two conclusions that he considers pertinent, the first being the fact that a high percentage of those polled (70 percent) said that they were in favor of negotiations with illegal armed groups." This, he says, appears to be a clear indication that the idea of war as the only solution to the armed conflict "is no longer held by the majority of Colombians" and would seem to give the nation's leaders a mandate to seek a negotiated settlement. Another noteworthy result was the fact that a total of 61percent felt that the situation in the country would remain the same or worsen were President Uribe to be re-elected. *FBIS Report in Spanish* (September 28, 2005).

39. Lieutenant General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla who took power between 1953 and 1957 during the worst period of *La Violencia*.

40. David Bushnell, "Politics and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Colombia," in Charles Bergquist, Ricardo Peñaranda, Gonzalo Sánchez (eds.), [*Violence in Colombia. The Contemporary Crisis in Historical Perspective*](#) (Wilmington, Del: Scholarly Resources, 2002), 17-19.

41. "The vast majority of the people I met in Medellín have severed the link between the violence and its perpetrators. While they condemn the killings, the notion that someone is responsible for them seems to have disappeared. Medellín's priests, bankers, judges, and politicians speak about the cocaine problem with concern. But they talk about it in a fog of passive voice, as if the problem were as anonymous and unpredictable as a sudden storm, for which no one is responsible and about which nothing can be done. They are free to condemn the violence while paying respect to its perpetrators." Tina Rosenberg, [*Children of Cain*](#) (New York: William Morrow, 1991), 57.